Europe's Push to Teach in English Creates Barriers in the Classroom
As universities on the continent try to make English academe's lingua franca, students might be losing out

By Aisha Labi

Like a growing number of scholars in Europe, Philipp J.H. Schröder, a popular professor of economics at Aarhus University, is something of a polyglot. A native of Germany, he earned his undergraduate degree in England and now lives and teaches in Denmark's second-largest city.

His English, though moderately accented, seems flawless in conversation, so he would appear the ideal candidate to preside over an increasingly common type of classroom in Europe: one with few native English speakers but where English is the language of instruction.

Mr. Schröder estimates that about 80 percent of his teaching is now in English, but he has few illusions about how fluent he truly is.

"I prefer to speak German, or Danish, for that matter," he confesses. "I have frustrations in English."

He is not alone. As universities across Europe offer more programs in English to attract an international student body and raise their international profiles, the growing pains are becoming evident. Some students complain that their professors' language skills are not classroom-ready. Some professors complain that their students, many of whom come from different countries and cultures, aren't adapting well to their new environment.

With more than 2,000 programs being taught in English, several experts are beginning to discuss these concerns.

Critics of the growing use of English include nationalist politicians, students and professors, and pedagogical experts, who have argued that adopting English as a lingua franca imperils other languages and creates classrooms and lecture halls in which cultural differences hinder communication and comprehension.

Even supporters of the practice acknowledge that the swift embrace of English has often taken place with insufficient preparation, and that universities must do more to deal with the complications that can arise.

The internationalization of higher education, in which students come together speaking different languages and are accustomed to radically different learning styles, has produced a "Bermuda Triangle of pedagogy, culture, and language" in many universities, says Karen M. Lauridsen, an associate professor at the Aarhus School of Business and Social Sciences, who has developed training programs at her university to help professors
deal with such challenges.

**Profound Cultural Differences**

When European universities began offering programs in English, Ms. Lauridsen says, it was assumed that some of the initial hurdles would disappear as older professors retired and younger professors, with more international experience, took their places.

In Denmark, for example, previous generations of academics had relatively little experience studying or working abroad, but all doctoral students are now required to spend at least a semester in another country.

Instead, Ms. Lauridsen says, it has become apparent that teaching difficulties are not simply a question of language but are rooted in profound cultural differences.

For example, she says, "here in the northern part of Europe, we place great emphasis on autonomous learning, and expect students to work independently and critically present the information they are presented."

Elsewhere in Europe, teaching methods emphasize students' listening to lectures, taking notes, demonstrating their learning through written tests, and being able to repeat what they have learned from professors' lectures.

Moreover, information that some students might grasp immediately could leave those from another culture befuddled. Students' ways of handling that kind of confusion also vary widely.

"In a lot of Asian cultures, there is a big thing about not losing face," Ms. Lauridsen notes, "and students don't want to admit that they don't know what they need to know."

In such cases, even if students do end up trying to confront the issue head-on, meeting with their professor might not solve the problem. Because many Asian students tend to "always nod and smile like they have understood," she says, "it takes a while to decode some of these students, for those of us who are used to more direct ways of interacting."

**Lowest Common Denominator**

These kinds of difficulties are common in English-speaking countries as well.

Even universities in Britain, which attract more overseas students than do those in any other country in Europe, "need to address the fact that they can't just teach in English the way they teach native speakers," says Ms. Lauridsen. "They also have multilingual, multinational classrooms."

Mr. Schröder says the dynamic in his classrooms is similar to what he observes at academic conferences, where few people are native speakers of English. Discussion tends to settle around what he describes as "a lowest common denominator."

Sometimes that's not a problem. "In subjects like economics, there is not a lot lost really by people having a very meager use of language and being narrow in their vocabulary," he says. But in disciplines where language is more central to intellectual debate, meaningful scholarly discourse can be a challenge.
In part by seeking assistance through programs that Ms. Lauridsen and her colleagues have developed, Mr. Schröder has come to understand that a central part of teaching is motivating students and helping them interact with the material rather than simply make their way through it.

His hard work has paid off. In 2008 he was named Teacher of the Year at the Aarhus School of Business and Social Sciences—a rare accolade for a professor from the economics department.

Understanding how to motivate multicultural students also transformed his approach in the classroom. Now, for example, he says, he is much more aware of difficulties that might arise from pairing students from different cultural backgrounds for collaborative projects.

To be sure, the introduction of English into the classroom has had plenty of successes. A Danish survey conducted last year found overall high levels of satisfaction with the level of English in classrooms among both students and professors. But, says Ms. Lauridsen, "there is always room for improvement."

Teaching Better Teaching
Aarhus professors who feel that their English-language skills could benefit from some polishing have long had the option of taking courses, but a pilot program offers them a more comprehensive set of resources. Along with five other universities in the region, Aarhus has developed a series of courses not just aimed at improving language skills but also focused on broader pedagogical and cultural issues.

The four one-day and two-day courses, each of which is limited to about 30 participating professors, cover such topics as working in a multicultural and multilingual environment and offer tools for building intercultural competence, increasing student participation, and understanding how the Danish "learning culture" compares with other cultures.

The courses are optional, but there has been so much demand that the program has had to turn some professors away, Ms. Lauridsen says. One hurdle, she says, is that "as always, those who sign up for the courses are not necessarily the ones who need them the most."

The system is not entirely voluntary, however. Student evaluations are taken into account, and if professors "don't meet student expectations, or if we have student complaints, we need to take action," she says. Part of that remedial action, she explains, would be for the professor who communicated poorly to take a course.

Aarhus's proactive approach to the challenges of teaching in English remains the exception. In Finland, forcing professors to improve their English skills is seen as an infringement of academic freedom.

Resistance to Reform
Søren Berg Rasmussen, a political-science master's-degree student from Denmark whose entire college experience has been at the University of Helsinki, where he is active in the
student union, says the quality of English that he has encountered among his professors has been almost uniformly poor.

If professors were required to take the tests of English as a foreign language that students must pass in order to take those same courses, Mr. Rasmussen guesses that "half the teaching staff would not be allowed to teach in English."

In terms of his own professors and instructors, he says, the percentage is even higher. He has often felt better off relying on texts than on his instructors' classroom command of English.

Concerns are widespread enough among students, he says, that the issue comes up often in conversation. For foreign students, who have chosen Helsinki based in large part on its reputation as an internationally oriented institution, "it's one of the things that easily becomes a disappointment."

He and other students have pressed the administration for more-stringent standards for English among instructors, but have met resistance.

Jukka Kola, vice rector in charge of teaching and studies at the university, says that he is aware of the complaints Mr. Rasmussen and other students have raised, but that they have been relatively limited in number.

"We know there are some problems, but there could also be problems when you are teaching even in Finnish or Swedish," he says, referring to Finland's two national languages.

Student dissatisfaction could have more to do with pedagogy than with linguistic ability, he says, and Helsinki has no plans to institute any language requirement for professors who teach in English.

"Teaching is based on research, and our professors are very international, which should provide them with quite good English in their areas of specialization," Mr. Kola says. The 35 English-language master's-level courses the university offers already require extra work of the professors, who must translate their course materials from the original language. Imposing an additional language-test requirement could be a deterrent to their teaching in English, at a time when the university is seeking to expand its English-language offerings.

For his part, Mr. Rasmussen is not persuaded by the argument that having produced high-quality research in English is evidence of an ability to teach in English.

"I don't think it says anything about your skills in teaching English, whether you can produce a text. In theory, you could produce a text in Finnish and have someone translate it," he says.

Get Their Act Together
Wolfgang Mackiewicz, director of the Language Centre at the Free University of Berlin and president of the European Language Council, thinks there are two explanations for
the reluctance on the part of some universities to ensure professors' command of English. Institutions believe that simply increasing the number of courses in English will enhance their international reputations, and administrators all too often assume that "quality will happen of its own accord," he says.

"I've heard quite a number of rectors say, 'This is a transition period, and the problems will sort themselves out.'"

As more universities offer a broader range of courses in English, Mr. Mackiewicz says, they need to develop formal policies to focus on the complex mix of language, pedagogy, and culture with which they are faced.

"We have to encourage universities to think about these things and get their act together," he says.

At his institution, Mr. Mackiewicz says, "I want courses not to be taught entirely in English, I want them to be taught bilingually," with international and German students able to express themselves in English and German.

The Free University's location in Berlin and its history as a product of the cold war are essential components of its institutional identity and must be taken into account in formulating a language policy, he says. "Each institution has to consider their situation within their own given context."

The Free University has sought assistance with language training for its professors from the University of Edinburgh, Mr. Mackiewicz says.

Grant proposals are being considered for a European project that will explore how well universities are grappling with the challenges of teaching in English and help institutions develop strategies for improvement.

That project—to be coordinated in part by Ms. Lauridsen and her colleagues at Aarhus—will receive financial backing from the European Commission, the executive arm of the European Union, which is increasingly focusing on the challenges of multilinguality.

**The Future of English**

The fate of French and German, and before that Latin, as dominant languages of European higher education, holds potentially sobering lessons for the future of English.

In a recent book, *The Last Lingua Franca: English Until the Return of Babel*, Nicholas Ostler, chairman of the Foundation for Endangered Languages, argues that the ubiquity of English will lead to its eventual demise as a global lingua franca, long before other, more ostensibly vulnerable languages.

The kind of simplified, lowest-common-denominator English that is increasingly spoken by non-native speakers in university classrooms throughout Europe represents a failure, not a triumph, for the language, Mr. Ostler argues.

Mr. Schröder's own experience would seem to back up that hypothesis.
He recently co-taught a one-day course with a native English speaker. One of the students praised his language abilities on the evaluation form, saying he couldn't even understand the other instructor.

"For these audiences," he observes, "my having an accent and using more limited vocabulary is not necessarily a disadvantage."